

The many lives and deaths of Louise Brunet

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Who was Louise Brunet, and did she actually exist?

A few letters and some official documents buried in the archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris and Nantes indicate that there was once a young woman who went by this name. These classified files show that Louise Brunet was someone who rebelled against the established orders and fought for a better life alongside Lyon's silk workers in the famous Canuts revolt of 1834. But is this the same Louise that you are about to encounter here? Yes and no.

Yes, because you will come face to face with obscure remnants that we have assembled here from the turbulent life of one Louise Brunet. No, because, as you will discover, the world is full of countless Louise Brunets whose stories, deemed far too insignificant for the grand annals of history, have been swept into the far corners of oblivion. The little evidence that you shall examine next, despite some of its dubious nature, reveals the existence of many Louise Brunets, of which only a few are presented here.

Our search for Louise Brunet begins with a faded, handwritten letter found in the private archive of the descendants of a notable Lyonnaise silk dynasty. Dated 9 March 1840, it was addressed from Louise in Beirut, where she was working in a Mount Lebanon silk factory owned by a Lyon-based entrepreneur, to her sister in Lyon. How this letter ended up in this archive only to be rediscovered some 180 years later remains a mystery.

The revelation of this first correspondence is corroborated through additional personal letters, visual fragments and long-lost relics, many of which are presented here. As our investigation advances, a common thread begins to develop, and two things in particular stand out. Though originating from different times and places, each object embodies, in tangible form, the existence of a person seeking to liberate themselves from the circumstances into which they were born. The second shared peculiarity: these individuals almost always disappear, vanishing from existence under conspicuous circumstances. The mass of evidence collected here presents a picture of individual struggles from these seemingly unrelated cases that are unequivocally related to these subjects' bodies.

Racialised, gendered, colonised or depleted by unjust power structures, the body is the first of many thresholds where conflict rages and resolves, illness festers and abates, and life in all of its complexity, at least in some sense, begins and ends. Across concepts of race, nationality and gender, among other determining factors, the fragile yet resilient lives that emerge from the gathered materials bear such an uncanny resemblance to Louise Brunet, the silk weaver from Lyon, that one has to wonder whether they are in fact different manifestations of the same being appearing in various guises in unknown iterations. Could it be that this being only surfaces in

history at pivotal junctures, called upon to perform a certain role, and then moves on to another time and place to continue the same eternal battle?

It is possible that if one considers this hypothesis – which many will likely dismiss as madness – it might start to make sense and the many lives and deaths of Louise Brunet will emerge. Here you shall encounter some of them and get a glimpse of the ways in which fragility was harnessed as a generative form of resistance. But the investigation is far from over. Many Louise Brunets might be waiting to be revealed, including the one that may be residing within us: rising to the fore, seemingly disappearing, but somehow lingering on underneath time's thick skin, dormant yet not gone, silent but never silenced.

Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath

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In Search of Louise

For every Louise Brunet in existence, there are countless people who seek to bring her down. Louise walks in this world not quite a part of it. The world holds her back and asks her to conform. Louise is free, dignified and daring. Yet in the eyes of the world, she is childish, arrogant and mad. While she is determined to carve her own path, the world is set on breaking her down with lies. Everyone insists that she must take heed of the finger showing the way. Louise refuses to obey. She stands up. She speaks out. This is the finger that told scholars that the Earth is flat, betrayed the rebellious prophet in the garden, forced the oppressed to renounce their gods and punished the innocent boy for wanting to be a girl. Louise fights back. And the world retaliates. Frightened by difference, oppressors reach for the bullet and the knife. They threaten, lie, preach and kill. The world points its finger still. Louise resists. At times she falters, but her patient truth leads the way.

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Fragile Bodies

It is a sweltering mid-July day in 1992. Louise Brunet is a faded presence. He is curled up in this unfamiliar bed where he has been for several weeks, growing weaker by the day: moving less, eating less and not speaking much. An advance copy of his latest book, Memories That Smell like Gasoline, lies next to him, open to the last page. A few lines are marked with a faltering line: "I am waving my hands. I am disappearing. I am disappearing but not fast enough."

Louise had arrived in New York in the late 1970s and lived there ever since. He quickly established himself as a prolific visual artist, writer and gay rights activist. His daring art and critical writing captured the voice of the stigmatised gay community. New York had been attracting a swarm of defiant artists like Louise who were drawn to the irresistible blend of cheap rent, ample space and risk-taking spirit that permeated the city at the time. Young and hungry, they immersed themselves in the city, the East Village in particular. Amidst the crumbling blocks of one of New York's most notorious neighbourhoods, these misfits started making new art that echoed the politically-charged cultural landscape of their generation. Artists and curators were turning their flats into exhibition spaces showing unconventional works with photography, collage, DIY sculpture, graffiti and performance art taking centre stage. Concurrently, the music scene was bursting at the seams with the newly exploded forms like punk and hip-hop. The parties had been legendary. Yet while all these free souls had been dancing their nights away, a sinister shadow had begun to fall upon the city.

The AIDS epidemic had hit New York hard. Rumours of a so-called gay plague had begun circulating as early as 1981. Because AIDS first emerged among marginal communities like sex workers, drug users and queer people, the official response to the disease was uneven and underfunded. Conservative forces demonised the communities most affected. As late as 1986, the Reagan administration had continued its course of inaction by saying that HIV/AIDS almost exclusively affected gay men and intravenous drug users.

Louise is coughing. He gasps for air. A flashback of an image of a smiling boy wearing a patterned shirt and suspenders races through his mind. Louise had used a photocopy of this image in a collage two years earlier. A short text he had written around the image comes back to him. His lips murmur the ominous words from this illegible scribble: "One day, this kid will do something that causes men who wear the uniforms of priests and rabbis, men who inhabit certain stone buildings, to call for his death." The original photograph was a picture of Louise as a little boy. The words hint at the desires he had gradually discovered in himself "to place his naked body on the naked body of another boy..."

It is almost midnight at Saint Vincent's hospital in New York's Greenwich Village – the place twenty-something kids go to die. Louise is struggling. His friend has been staying up with him all

night, which has begun to turn into a tortuously early morning. Louise's friend is afraid that if he sleeps, he will not be there with Louise at the moment of his passing. He puts the book aside, dims the bedside lamp and crawls into the narrow hospital bed with him. He tells him that he will be right there, that he will make sure he keeps breathing. He promises him that nothing bad will happen to him while he sleeps. Finally, Louise closes his eyes.

** In memory of artists Nicolas Moufarrege (1947–1985), Rafael França (1957–1991), David Wojnarowicz (1954–1992) and many other whose lives were cut short by the AIDS epidemic*

** This text is inspired by testimonials from the AIDS Memorial Instagram account @theaidsmemorial*

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Fragile Skins

It is dawn on November 1st, 1894. Louise Brunet is making her way up the hill of Fourvière, also known as “the hill that prays.” Barefoot and breathless, she can hear the sound of the mob that has gathered in her pursuit. She has been running since noon the day before, after escaping from the tattered sheds in the Parc de la Tête d’Or where she had been forced to live since the previous spring.

Less than a year ago, Louise was still living in Tèngeéj, or Rufisque, near Dakar. A prosperous port town, Tèngeéj as Louise once knew it was quickly disappearing to make way for the administrative compounds of the newly founded French colonial settlements. Her father was a Muslim clergyman or serini in Wolof, the language that Louise speaks. He would often tell her stories of the great Lat Joor Ngoone Latiir Joop, the last ruler of the Cayor kingdom before it was defeated by France’s colonial army on 6 October 1886.

Memories of home come rushing back. It has only been nine months since Louise disembarked the Amazone in Bordeaux. The arduous journey took off from Porto-Novo, a city which had been recently annexed into another French colony, Dahomey. In total, close to 200 individuals were “imported” from various towns and cities across western, central and eastern Africa. Only 160 survived.

Louise and the many Sudanese, Dahomian and other Wolof people were brought to Lyon to inhabit the African Village of the Exposition univèrselle, internationale et coloniale of 1894. Marketed as a scientifically-sound ethnographic display, the exhibition blatantly disregarded the distinct backgrounds, histories, languages and cultures of the so-called natives to present an essentialist, colonial portrait of the Africa continent. Day after day for nine long months, Louise was put on display, bare-chested and clad with props she had never worn before. She was forced to pretend to be the wife, mother and daughter to people from other African cities, some more than 3,000 kilometres away from her hometown of Tèngeéj. They had all been “recruited” by the failed businessman Johannès Barbier, who promoted himself as an ethnographic expert on Africa. He first made a name for himself when L’Illustration published some of his scandalous photographs of an 1891 massacre in Bakel. In what was clearly a pre-arranged mise en abyme, the images showed decapitated Tukolor fighters who had failed to halt the French colonial seizure of their land.

A few days before the colonial exhibition had ended, rumours began circulating around the camp that Barbier, with help from Clément Ulysse Pila, a notable silk merchant and member of the Lyon Chamber of commerce who had organised the colonial displays, would be moving the exhibition to other cities where plans for future iterations were underway. Louise could not tolerate one more day of humiliation, so she escaped.

Climbing up the steep steps towards the city’s famous Basilica, she makes sure to cover her face

under a loose, hooded garment that she had taken from the camp. She desperately tries to hide her bare hands – not out of shame but in fear for her life.

Louise flings open the doors of the Virgin's Chapel, which has been standing on top of that hill since the twelfth century and remains the historic and religious heart of this sanctuary until today. The walls are covered with ex-votos: small lay paintings on canvas. They are often made by worshippers as tokens of gratitude to their saints for saving them from death, sickness, or war. One ex-voto makes Louise stop. The depicted scene shows a white-skinned man dressed in European garb surrounded by three dark-skinned figures. An inscription reads: "To Mary, helpful mother. Bishop Collomb and his missionaries saved by her protection from the fury of the savages. Caledonia, 19 July 1847." At this moment, the whole weight of history and its injustices weighs heavily on Louise's shoulders, and she feels defeated for the first time. She thinks to herself, "Who are the savages?"

Walking out to the edge of the hill, she takes in the view of the entire city below. The mob arrives shortly after, but there is no trace of Louise. They shout, "The witch has made herself disappear."

Louise's Wolof name remains unknown.

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Fragile Heroes

It is nine in the morning on May 15th, 1942. Louise Brunet waits on the pavement in front of the house where he has lived for the last 20 years. Standing with Louise are his wife Mami and their five children. At the age of 55, Louise is a proud, self-made man who owns and operates five greenhouses on a three-acre plot of land in Alameda County in San Francisco's East Bay area.

Kiyoshi Yukimura, or Mr. Yuki as Louise's friends and neighbours call him, was born in 1887 at 1344 Kearny Street on the eastern outskirts of San Francisco's Chinatown. Like many first-generation Japanese immigrants, Louise's parents had settled there. After the 1906 earthquake, the family relocated to Japantown in the city's Western Addition neighbourhood.

The hardworking Louise opened his first plant shop on Post Street, the main thoroughfare of Japantown, 25 years earlier. Five years later, newly married with a baby on the way, Louise purchased the house one block to the west on Fillmore Street where he has been living with his family ever since.

Although Louise is standing at the same spot where he usually catches his daily ride to work, the destination of today's journey is unfathomably different, even surreal. Louise's children are huddled together, nestled between him and his wife. Three suitcases lie between their fidgeting feet. They are marked with the family name Yukimura written in bold white paint. Large, vertical identification tags hang around each family member's neck with the same family name and an identifying number: "Yukimura 1/6", "Yukimura 2/6", "Yukimura 3/6", and so on... Louise and his family are among tens of thousands of Japanese Americans being forcibly relocated and incarcerated in what the US Department of Justice euphemistically calls "relocation centers". Following the surprise attack on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor by the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service on 7 December 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 on 19 February 1942. The order authorised the forced "evacuation" of any persons considered to be a security threat and cleared the way for the incarceration of almost every Japanese American for the duration of the war in militarised internment camps. Two-thirds of the detainees are US citizens who were born in the United States and lived in the country their whole lives. Louise, and his family, are among them.

Louise hears the familiar roar of a bus engine approaching the corner. One of his hands rests gently on his youngest daughter's shoulder. She looks up towards him and whispers, "The bus is coming," as she holds onto his waist. "It is. It is," Louise replies as he gently pats her on the head. With his other hand he clasps firmly around the strap of the large bag that he is carrying on his right shoulder.

Louise had woken up early this morning. He wanted to make sure that some things were not left behind; in particular, heirlooms that his parents had brought back from their hometown of

Yokohama. One thing held a special place in Louise's heart: a samurai armour that belonged to his great, great grandfather. Louise had worn parts of it on his wedding day. "This is the gusoku that I wore," Louise's father used to tell him as a child, "on 8 July 1853, the day Japan changed forever." He was referring to the day that US Commodore Matthew Perry commanded four black navy vessels into Japan's Edo Bay, beginning a compelled opening of the Japanese empire to foreign trade. "Our land, our time, our way" was something his father used to declare at almost every family gathering. Louise had never fully grasped the meaning of these words until this morning while standing on the pavement, waiting with his family to begin their forced relocation.

The family climbs into the bus. Ten hours later, they find themselves almost 600 kilometres away in Manzanar – one of ten mainland internment camps – located at the foot of the Sierra Nevada mountains in California's Owens Valley. While exiting the bus, Louise's eldest son refuses to get off. His act of disobedience is the first of many that would ultimately lead to the Manzanar uprising on 5 and 6 December 1942. To quell the insurrection, the US military police would fire into the crowd, killing Louise and his 17-year-old son instantly. Some say they heard them shouting, "Our land, our time, our way." Others say they found Louise's samurai armour bloodied on the ground. But this does not occur until seven months later. Today, the armour is packed neatly in Louise's bag.

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Fragile Representations

Louise feels a sudden sharp pain in her right leg. It had started in the ball of her foot, pierced through her knee and rippled up her spine. The pangs had significantly increased over the past four days that she has spent sitting for Mr. Boulanger's new painting. She clenches her fist, as she hopelessly tries to maintain the same pose that the artist instructed her to keep for the last three hours.

She grins while her knees quiver beneath her. But Rose, as she is known by the painters who employ her, is determined not to reveal her physical weakness. How could she, when her body has been her main source of livelihood for more than 30 years?

Louise started sitting at the age of 16, mostly as a live model for painting classes at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. However, it wasn't until 1824 that she would be solicited by established artists for significant paintings requiring many days and sometimes weeks of work. That year Eugène Delacroix first presented his painting of her to the public. He titled it Mademoiselle Rose after her. The painting took a whole week to finish. Not once did Louise's body falter. Delacroix did not talk to her other than to instruct her on how to pose. On the last day while making the final touches to the painting, Delacroix turned to her. "What do they call you?" he asked. "Rose," Louise responded. And that was it. Delacroix asked Louise to pose for him on several other occasions in the future, but he was not a man of many words.

Today, Mr. Boulanger, on the other hand, is happy to talk about all sorts of things. Trying hard to ignore her pain, Louise wanders into her thoughts. Boulanger's voice rambles on about the previous night's dinner with Victor Hugo, which makes it even harder for Louise to switch off. She closes her eyes. She thinks about the details of a painting she has been working on recently. Not many people know, certainly not Mr. Boulanger, that Louise is an accomplished painter herself. Several years ago with her modelling career at its peak, she put a good chunk of the money she had saved into one of the few classes that allowed women to paint from live models. This provided her with invaluable knowledge about the depiction of bodily proportions and movements. Louise had even succeeded, under a pseudonym of course, to exhibit some of her paintings at the annual Salon de Paris organised by the École nationale supérieure des Beaux Arts. Her Portrait d'une jeune fille was even praised by a couple of critics. Boulanger was not included in the Salon. In a fairer world, Louise would be the artist standing behind the easel while Boulanger sat in front, shuddering in pain.

The thought of Boulanger modelling for her brings a smirk to Louise's face. "No, no, no," Boulanger snaps. He grabs a veil from a trunk of accessories that lies next to him, thrusts it towards Louise and asks her to hold it in front of her face. "It is a painting of a woman in a harem," he explains, "and therefore, as tradition has it in all Oriental countries, your face must be covered." Boulanger's ideas of the so-called Orient are in line with the zeitgeist. His paintings,

like those of Gérôme and Louise's first patron Delacroix, purport to show an authentic glimpse of a location and its inhabitants. They depict an exotic and, therefore, racialised and often sexualised culture from a distant place where women are subdued yet titillating.

Louise complies at first and holds the veil in front of her face, her head tilted slightly downward. At this point her pain is unbearable. She drops her arms, lifts her head up and tries to calm herself by breathing slowly in and out. "Cover your ugly face, I said," Boulanger yells. Louise feels the blood rushing in her veins. Anger seems to be the only feeling that overrides her pain. "My name is Rose. I also paint," she says with a calmness that comes from nowhere and walks out: away from Boulanger, Delacroix, a world dominated by men, the last 25 years of her life, her ageing body and every false image in which it has appeared. This was 173 years ago. Many images are still misleading, many names are still uncovered. Louise keeps on walking.

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Fragile Desires

At 11 years old, Louise Brunet is already at odds with her world. Today's pompous affair is not helping. Her mother woke her and her three siblings up at six in the morning. They were all dressed in their special Sunday clothes and had to be at church as early as 8:00 a.m. to present themselves to the rector. The whole family is to be consecrated to the Virgin Mary, a tradition in her family for generations.

But Louise does not understand why people must blindly carry on doing certain things simply because others have done them for years. Why must she wear this pink dress that her mother chose for her? And more importantly, why can't she be the one kneeling in the front row next to her father instead of her two brothers?

Louise shuffles forward, and her mum tries to pull her back. Louise scoffs at her and refuses to budge. Her father, aware of the kerfuffle that is about to take place, warns her to behave. Louise, compelled by a sense of overwhelming unfairness, starts making small groaning noises which soon turn into a full-blown tantrum. As it often happens, the day ends in tears – another embarrassment for the family caused by Louise. Things will not get better, at least not for many years.

As a teenager, Louise feels very different. She knows she is attracted to girls but does not know the right words or how to even say them out loud. By the time she turns 20, she has alienated many of the people in her life, but she won't be shamed into denial. She will not conceal her desires. The hurt and anger raging inside her will be the forces that drive Louise to turn her life around. One morning, after a few years working in spinning mills, she simply walks out. In the next four decades, little is known about the places Louise goes, the professions she resorts to or the many lovers she keeps.

Louise is 51 years old. She resurfaces in Paris, right across the Place Blanche and not far from the infamous Moulin Rouge. It is the heyday of Pigalle's red years. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered individuals in Paris are carving out spaces for themselves in the shadows of Montmartre. Only a few women proprietors cater to an almost exclusively female and lesbian clientele and Louise is one of them. Known as Madame Palmyre, she runs a popular brasserie called La Souris, one of several notable lesbian bars in Pigalle. Every night, she sits enthroned behind her counter with her petit bulldog Bouboule perched right next to her.

Tonight Louise feels particularly carefree. La Souris has been included in the Guide des Plaisirs à Paris. She hands a copy of the pamphlet to a fierce brunette, a regular at her bar, and asks her to read it out loud. She begins: "La Souris with its small low rooms and red curtains evokes the appearance of a woman's boudoir. However, this is rather a brasserie for women. At Le Rat Mort or l'Abbaye de Thélème, ladies are looking for men. Here, they are looking for each other. In the evening, you rarely meet a representative of the stronger sex there. Instead,

masculine women, mistresses of the parlour, dine alone at small tables, and offer each other cigarettes, sweets and kisses.” “Did you hear that, my Coffee Pot?” Louise shouts across the room to Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, who is busy sketching Louise and her company. He nods in acknowledgement, a pencil between his teeth, his fingers smudging away at his paper.

For the first time in many years Louise is content with a feeling of restfulness only experienced after finally getting to lie down after a long day of hard work. Her mind wanders back to that early morning episode at the church, and somehow it doesn't matter anymore. A family does not have to be a mother, father and children. The door swings open and a man and a woman walk in, clearly feeling out of place. Louise turns up. The woman wears a long pink silk dress. “What a lovely outfit,” Louise offers, her deep hoarse voice echoing across the hall. “Come in, we might bite, but the drinks are on the house!”

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Fragile Labours

Louise Brunet is only 18 years old when she is recruited by a henchman of the great silk merchant Nicolas Portalis upon her release from prison in the Drôme region south of Lyon. On an icy cold morning in 1839 with few better alternatives, she embarks on the Heliopolis from Marseille to try her luck in Lebanon.

Eighteen other women all seeking the better life promised to them by this merchant of great repute also join the voyage. To the dismay of Portalis's recruiter, some appear with their children. The additional cost of accommodating these unexpected extra travellers will become a matter of financial contention a few months later.

Portalis had recently hatched the idea of "importing" experienced spinners to launch his business: a major silk factory in the village of Btetir in Mount Lebanon. Lyon was an ideal breeding ground for this high quality workforce, but the city's history of revolts would not make it easy for him. In April 1834, in the hope of improving their living conditions, the silk workers, known locally in Lyon as canuts, had thrown the capital of Gauls into chaos during the second Canut revolt. The civil unrest became so widespread that the French state was forced to intervene, sending armed troops from Paris to reestablish order, which they had already done in 1831 and would do again in 1848. The Brunet household – built by a spinner to provide housing for his workers and who most likely was related to Louise – became a stronghold for the canuts. The revolt was ultimately suppressed by force. Louise Brunet was imprisoned along with over 10,000 other participants in the revolt. However, as her story proves, the seed of her resolve against the established order was deeply rooted.

At some point during the voyage to Lebanon, the captain deviously suggests he no longer wants to deliver Louise and the other spinners to Portalis. Louise is forced to submit to him sexually in order to reach her final destination. A few months later, she writes to her sister to tell her about the hell of her daily life. "It is a blessing that some of these women perished due to the cholera pandemic that had swept across Beirut upon our arrival," Brunet laments. She tells her sister how she has taught young Lebanese women not to put their health at risk in spinning mills. Many of these women are actually six-year-old children. They were recruited from Jesuit and Lazarist orphanages financed by the affluent Lyon Silk merchants who own the factories. The most notorious among them were the spinning factories of Mourgue d'Algue in 'Ayn Hamadé, Palluat and Testenoire et Cie in Al Qrayyé, which would eventually be bought by Veuve Guérin et Fils. The latter, whose factories are the largest with 558 basins spread over four buildings, are infamous for their collaboration with the sisters of the Filles de la Charité.

The working conditions are so bad that Louise foments a revolution with some of her peers and eventually flees. She is captured and once again finds herself imprisoned. Louise's name appears once more in a letter addressed from Portalis to Nicolas Prosper Bourée, the newly installed French Consul General in Beirut. In the letter, Portalis refuses to pay for her expatriation.

In one ambiguous passage from this correspondence – which can be found in the classified archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs as file number 92PO_A_28 – Portalis' strongman Clément Drezeton proposes paying for Louise's trip to the neighbouring island of Cyprus but declines to finance her travels any further. Beyond this letter, Louise disappears. Resistant at heart, the image of the young woman dipping her skilled hands every day in bubbling chemicals to pull out thin threads of silk is still haunting. Almost two hundred years later, is it not imaginable that Louise Brunets around the world continue to be depleted by the skewed economic structures that exploit them?

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Fragile Expectations

The streets of Beirut's port district are buzzing with excitement, especially down by the docks where crowds have been gathering since the early morning hours. It is not surprising for this old part of town to be teeming with activity at this time of day, yet something about the frenzied atmosphere feels out of sync with the usual daily hustle.

It is 16 August 1860, Louise Brunet leans against an old wall in the courtyard of the silk factory where she has been working for the last four years. She is wondering whether she should join the other girls who left for the waterfront a little earlier. The superintendent of the factory had even given them an exceptional permission to leave their basins and participate in the current fanfare. Within the hour, a large naval fleet would arrive that the French had sent to intervene in quelling the hostilities that had erupted last May between the local Druze and Christians.

In announcing the special permission, the superintendent had declared it "a great day for the natives of this land, and for France." Louise is still trying to wrap her head around this absurd statement. She understands how, considering the events of late, some would think that the local Christians might need protection. But are they at such a risk that France needs to intervene with 6,000 soldiers? Or is it that France senses in these skirmishes an opportunity to safeguard its economic interests and maintain its dominance over the local silk industry? In the past years, raw silk had become an increasingly lucrative commodity on the global market and accounted for almost 60% of all exports from this otherwise unassuming port. Mulberry trees, the favoured food source for the silkworms necessary for the production of raw silk, had long ago replaced the grains and cereals that used to be the pride of Mount Lebanon's farmers, Louise's family included. The demand for silk cocoons among the largely Lyon-based French silk merchants had become so great that in a few years mulberry trees would occupy nearly 80% of all cultivated lands.

Louise finally decides to head down to the waterfront. After all, it is not every day that a military fleet headed by a general sails into such a small port. Louise descends the main road, which – normally brimming with bustling shops, brokers' stands, peddlers' carriages and street vendors – is eerily empty. But she hears the cheering crowds in the distance and picks up the pace. Her heartbeat is accelerating. The last house is now behind her. She makes a left turn, and her feet finally touch the sand. A spectacular scene emerges: General Charles-Marie-Napoléon de Beaufort d'Hautpoul is perched on his studded white horse. His arm is stretched before him, his white-gloves glistening in the light, as he charges through the dazzled onlookers with a dense column of troops behind him. Upon departing from Marseille, d'Hautpoul and his troops were addressed by Napoleon III himself, declaring, "Wherever the French flag is seen to pass, nations know that a great cause precedes it, and a great people follows it."

Louise notes the tricolore flag rising out from within the crowd. Women throw themselves at the General's feet and lift their babies up to him as if to seek his blessing. "Is he a soldier or a prophet?" Louise wonders in disbelief. It is a spectacle that will be carved in Louise's memory forever.

Some of Beirut's elites look over the proceedings from a distance: the Khazens, the Sursocks, the Bassoulis and other reputable families who made their fortunes in the silk industry. Amongst them are many French factory owners, almost all of them from Lyon, including her boss. Louise recognises the Portalis brothers, owners of the factories in Bteietar; Monsieur Figon and his wife from Palluat et Testenoire in 'Ain Hamadeh; and Monsieur Croizat, the broker of the Guerin family. They were all regulars at the factory. Louise is certain that while she can recognise all of them, they most probably had no recollection of her at all, or her name: Mabboubeh, Arabic for "the loved one". The thought of being so anonymous and inconsequential to these people makes her at once furious and desperate.

Perhaps Louise's indignation today is too irrational, even ill-founded. But there will be times in the not-so-distant future when others will also feel Louise's rage and desperation. Her despair will be shared by the entire populace when the great famine hits during World War II as hundreds of thousands of people perish from hunger with nothing left to eat but the leaves of mulberry trees. They will understand her rage when they hear the words of Louis Pradel, president of the Lyon Chamber of Commerce, when he says "that here in Lyon, Lebanon is considered to be a colony." The Lyon Chamber of Commerce will raise more than a million francs in 1920 to support the French Mandate in Lebanon, which will last until 1943. They will welcome General Gouraud, the first High Commissioner of France, who on the 1st of September 1920 will declare the founding of Great Lebanon. In his speech, he will make a point to praise the significance of this budding nation's port. Many years later, the French will come back after a terrible explosion hits that same port mentioned by Gouraud, where Louise Brunet stands today, witnessing history being made. But this will happen a long time from now and will be witnessed by other Louises in the future.

Louise feels someone yanking her arm, pulling her away from her musings. She turns around. It's her friend from the factory Amal, whose name is the Arabic word for hope. "There you are", she says, "we have been waiting for you." Louise feigns excitement. Amal pulls her sleeve, "Follow me. We can have a better view from the other side." Louise disappears into the feverish scene while the crowds cheer, "The French have come to save us!"